**An Exploration of Mental Illness**

**and Mental Health**

**Introduction: Themes, Purpose, and Rationale**

Mental health issues are faced by many teenagers—be it by they themselves, or in their relationships with friends or family. Many students are in severe emotional pain but feel they cannot tell anybody. On the other hand, as a teenager, I was overwhelmed when two of my friends told me they were suicidal, and this experience is by no means unique. Many students are overwhelmed when friends confide in them about self-harm, depression, and suicidal thoughts. And for good reason—24 percent of all deaths of 15-24 year olds are suicides. As well, many students who are care-givers of mentally ill family members may not feel that there is anyone to reach out to for help.

The recurrent theme here is silence and stigma. By doing an English unit on mental illness, I hope to break the silence. By opening up a dialogue, students will realize that they are not alone in their experiences with mental illness. When these issues are aired out in the open, students will be more likely to seek help for themselves or their loved ones. The study of texts is a wonderful vehicle for this project because mental illness issues are opened up without any pressure on students to divulge their own personal experiences unless they want to.

Many representations of mental illness run the risk of glamourizing and romanticizing it; on the other hand, other representations demonize or vilify the sufferers, making those with mental illness appear a threat to society. On the other hand, bringing the topic of mental illness out into the open often works best if people can connect on a personal and emotional level. Students can be encouraged to consider how the various mediums included in this text set represent mental illness—what are the advantages and disadvantages of various mediums?

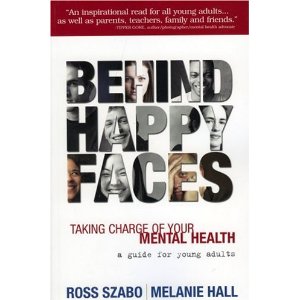
1. **Guide**

***Behind Happy Faces: Taking Charge of your Mental Health, a guide for young adults***

**By Ross Szabo and Melanie Hall**

**Summary**

As its title suggests, this book is a pragmatic guide for young adults. While it covers a wide breadth of topics, it is an accessible, easy fast read. The chapters cover the following aspects of mental illness: common mental disorders and their descriptions and symptoms; the reasons we pretend nothing is wrong with us; gender, race, class and sexuality; dealing with a mental disorder; how to help family members with mental illness; navigating friendships and mental illness; and navigating romantic relationships and mental illness. Throughout the book, Ross Szabo’s struggle with bipolar disorder is interwoven anecdotally. As well, each section has many first person accounts from other people.

[](http://www.amazon.ca/gp/product/images/1566253055/ref=dp_image_0?ie=UTF8&n=916520&s=books)

**Rationale**

This book would give students a broad understanding of what is meant by “mental illness”. Most importantly, the book speaks to the need to bring the discussion of mental illness out into the open, emphasizing that it is too heavy an issue to carry alone. In terms of analyzing this text, students can be encouraged to consider the many personal anecdotes that occur throughout the book. What is their effect? If the goal of this text is to give a broad understanding of mental illness while encouraging people to feel less alone in their plights, how does this guide compare to say, a film? Would the goals of this text be better communicated via a different format or even medium? Does this text romanticize mental illness? If not, does the format and medium play a role in this?

1. **Conference Paper**



***Racial Discrimination and Mental Health: Racialized and Aboriginal Communities***

**By Kwasi Kafele**

**Summary**

Written in 2004 and now published on the Ontario Human Right Commission web-site, this paper contributes a cultural and racial analysis of mental health issues in Canada. In fact, at the time of publication, the author, Kwasi Kafele, was the Director for Corporate Diversity at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health here in Toronto. He points out that as the psychiatric system is still Eurocentric, it fails to offer culturally appropriate care for members of aboriginal communities and other racialized groups. He also points out that there are a disproportionate number of aboriginal and racialized individuals living in poverty as compared to their white counterparts. Some of these individuals living in poverty experience inadequate housing, deficiencies in water quality, and homelessness. Kafele shows how this economic marginalization along with other factors such as gender and sexual orientation can exacerbate mental health issues for aboriginal and racialized individuals. He also offers pragmatic ways we can improve the Canadian psychiatric system to serve these groups better.

**Rationale**

I chose this text in an effort to fill some of the gaps in this text set; that is, analyses of culture and race as related to mental health, as well as shortcomings of the Canadian psychiatric system. As well, this paper invites students to consider whether we must as a country not only address the Canadian psychiatric system to ameliorate the mental health of aboriginal and racial groups but also address and improve economic inequities experienced by these groups. Finally, students can be encouraged to consider the advantages and disadvantages of learning about mental health issues through papers such as this one as compared to other formats in this text set such as films, first-hand accounts and short stories.

1. **Web-Site**

[](http://www.google.ca/imgres?hl=en&sa=X&biw=1058&bih=521&tbm=isch&prmd=imvns&tbnid=pRcj6iJnzTpooM:&imgrefurl=http://twitter.com/facetheissue&docid=ar__SZxhcwV7kM&itg=1&imgurl=http://a1.twimg.com/profile_images/1480092983/facethe_issue1.jpeg&w=100&h=100&ei=IdKDT9SgLI6K8QSa5rSaCA&zoom=1&iact=hc&vpx=134&vpy=239&dur=365&hovh=82&hovw=82&tx=104&ty=66&sig=103837131677905168657&page=3&tbnh=80&tbnw=80&start=20&ndsp=13&ved=1t:429,r:0,s:20,i:137)

***Facetheissue.com***

**Produced and Designed by: Jane Semel, Melanie Hall and Michael Marina**

**Summary**

The web-site *Facetheissue.com* was created to give young people a space to talk about their tough issues anonymously. There are message boards on topics such as eating disorders, physical abuse, sexual abuse, low self-esteem, depression, self-mutilation and other painful issues. There are also animated videos on these various topics narrated by celebrities such as Nicole Kidman, Jennifer Lopez, Kate Hudson, Halle Berry and Sarah Jessica Parker. After perusing many of the message boards, I was relieved to see that the focus of the postings is on overcoming these issues—there are not anorexic or suicidal pacts being formed by the posters. In other words, the site is well moderated and is indeed a safe place for teens to seek catharsis and solace.

**Rationale**

By introducing students to this site, they will see that there is a place that they can post their writings anonymously. However, it can also lead to interesting discussion as to the fact that there are some sites on the internet that negatively address these tough psychological issues, such as sites where anorexic youth swap tips that reinforce or exacerbate anorexia. Figuring out what sites are “good” would be an excellent media literacy exercise for students. Also, students can be encouraged to analyze what is missing from *Facetheissue.com*. Why are all of the animation videos narrated by female celebrities? Is this site really only for female youth? If so, why doesn’t it say it is? What is the advantage of having celebrities narrate the videos? Are the graphics of the site inviting? Is the site user-friendly? What role can this site play in mental health, if any?

1. **Short Story**

[](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:YellowWallpaperCover.jpg)

***The Yellow Wallpaper***

**By Charlotte Perkins Gilman**

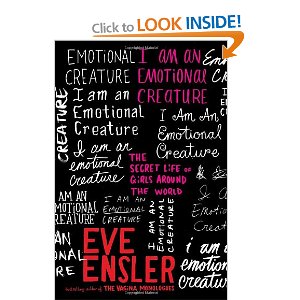
**Summary**

First published in 1892, this largely autobiographical short story was written at a time of shifting roles for women. The protagonist, recently having given birth and experiencing what we would now term “postpartum psychosis”, is placed on “rest cure” by her physician husband. She is confined to a bedroom and prohibited from touching a book, pen, or brush. She is allowed only two hours of mental stimulation per day, the idea being to re-domesticate her to the natural ways of her sex. The short story is comprised of diary entries by the protagonist and soon these entries obsess at great length about the yellow wallpaper on the walls of her room—she describes the pattern in great detail and even begins to imagine that the room is permeated by a stifling yellow smell. She also becomes convinced that she sees a woman trapped behind the yellow wall paper. The story ends with her husband unlocking the bedroom door and entering to find her on her hands and knees fervently trying to strip all of the yellow wallpaper from the bedroom walls. He faints and she crawls over him to continue her frenzied undertaking.

**Rationale**

This is an important work to read for the reason that many feminists laud it; it exposes an oppressive way in which female emotional suffering was understood and treated at the hands of the androcentric medical profession during the era that author writes in. That is, female psychological suffering was often used as an opportunity to assert a complete return to traditional female social roles. On the other hand, female psychological suffering that may have had legitimate external causes was often medicalized. This historical look back invites students to discuss whether there are any remnants of these past practices in current psychological and psychiatric practices in North America. It is also essential to analyze this text from a class perspective. That is, the protagonist’s “rest cure” is essentially a middle class or upper middle class treatment— in the protagonist’s absence, there are servants to look after her baby, do housework and make meals. So, it is important to understand this famous work as depicting an *upper middle class* female experience. Finally, students can be encouraged to consider whether this story romanticizes psychological suffering. If it does not, is there something in the content and style of the story that manages to avoid this? Or, is there something inherent in the short story medium that lends itself to avoiding this?

1. **Monologues**

[](http://www.amazon.ca/gp/reader/1400061040/ref=sib_dp_pt#reader-link)

***I am an Emotional Creature: The Secret Life of Girls around the World***

**By Eve Ensler**

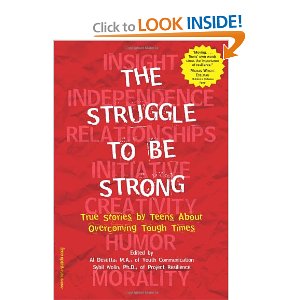
**Summary**

Eve Ensler, the creator of the Vagina Monologues who has been lauded as a sexual liberator of women now turns her attention to the emotional liberation of girls and female teenagers, believing that it is liberating for girls and young women to break their silence and speak their feelings, their truth. Each monologue is written by Ensler herself but is inspired by her time spent with girls and young women around the world. The girls’ experiences portrayed in the monologues range from that of exploited underage factory worker, child soldier, sex slave, anorexic, basketball player, and lesbian.

**Rationale**

Mental health is an important issue for everyone, not only those with a mental illness. This text is included based on the assumption that speaking one’s feelings, one’s truth, is good for one’s mental health. While there is the stereotype that girls and women are always speaking about their feelings, they may not always be speaking of their deepest, most important or painful experiences. This text is also included to show the wide range of issues that are faced by female youth around the world. The monologues are written in different formats—prose, poetry and some are actually dialogues. There is much that begs class discussion. Is it alright that Ensler wrote the monologues herself or should she have encouraged the girls and young women to author their own monologues? Is there some authenticity lost by virtue of Ensler writing the dialogues? Does Ensler’s project run the risk of being exploitative? Will the girls and young women receive financial compensation based on the sale of the book? Why did Ensler choose to write in prose for some and in poetry for others? Which formats do students find most compelling? Why?

1. **Non-Fiction Short Stories**

[](http://www.amazon.com/gp/reader/1575420791/ref=sib_dp_pt#reader-link)

**Summary**

From this collection of autobiographical stories authored by the teens themselves, I have chosen four short stories that centre around young men: Christopher overcomes his instinct to resort to violence when angry; Eliott faces losing his girlfriend over his alcohol abuse and also the alcoholism itself; Jamal comes to terms with the fact that his blackness is constantly challenged due to the fact that he grew up in a white neighbourhood with white friends; and Craig reconciles the fact that he can be both masculine and gay… and out to the world. Interestingly, most of these young men live in group homes, indicating that they have probably dealt with other tough issues in the course of their young lives.

***Stories Selected: “Controlling my Temper” by Christopher A. Bogle, “The Answer was Me” by Eliott Castro, “Color me Different” by Jamal K. Greene, and “Out, Without a Doubt” by Craig J. Jaffe***

**Selected from the book: *The Struggle to be Strong: True Stories by Teens about Overcoming Tough Times***

**Edited by Al Desetta and Dr. Sybil Wolin**

**Rationale**

The stories I have selected from *The Struggle to be Strong* are authored by male teens since Ensler’s book, *I am an Emotional Creature* centres around female youth. Similarly, these stories do not depict struggles with mental illness per say, but struggles of an emotional nature. I am working from the assumption that good mental health involves overcoming tough times and that failure to do so can compromise one’s mental health. As well, this text fits into the overall goal of this text set to bring emotional struggles out into the open. These accounts by male teens of overcoming tough times were authored by the teens themselves, inviting a comparison to the ‘professional’ authorship of Eve Ensler’s monologues. As well, the first-person accounts in *The Struggle to be Strong* more explicitly state what they have overcome and the lessons learned. Do students find more hope in this format than in Ensler’s more ‘creative’ monlogues? How does this text of first-hand accounts written by “non-writers” compare to the films or the song in this text set? Would the teen authors of these stories in *The Struggle to be Strong* have benefited from the catharsis of writing their own first-hand accounts? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this format?

1. **Autobiographical Film**

***Prozac Nation***

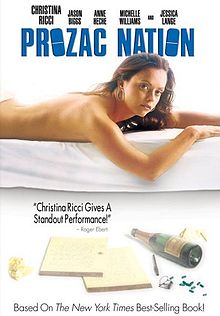
**Based on the autobiography by Elizabeth Wurtzel**

**Directed by Erik Skjoldbjaerg**

**Screenplay by Frank Deasy and Larry Gross**

**Summary**

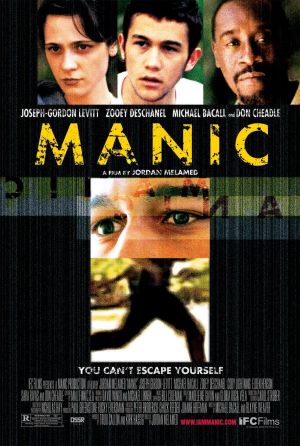
While this film is based loosely on Elizabeth Wurtzel’s autobiography of the same title, this film condenses the plot into Elizabeth’s first year at Harvard. Having won a scholarship to study journalism at Harvard, Elizabeth shows great talent and soon publishes an article in Rolling Stone. But she soon spirals downward into major depression. Along the way, she abuses sex, alcohol, and drugs, ultimately losing her best friend and her boyfriend. Elizabeth’s mother pays for her to enter therapy with a psychiatrist. Eventually, after months of therapy, her mother must move to a much smaller apartment because of the expense. While much of the film depicts Elizabeth’s depression, the last scene has her, in voice over, explain that although her recovery was gradual, she did recover.

[](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Prozac_Nation_film.jpg)

**Rationale**

This film, with its famous Hollywood actors, provides an accessible entry point into a discussion of mental illness. It opens up the question of nature or nurture. Did Elizabeth experience major depression because—as we see in a flash-back—her father abandoned her at an early age and her mother became over-involved in her life and ambitions? Or, was she genetically programmed to experience major depression? Or, must her plight be viewed as being influenced by both nature and nurture? Since Elizabeth self-medicates with sex, drugs, alcohol, the concept of self-medication and dual-diagnosis can also be discussed. As well, both the benefits and limitations of writing as therapy can be explored. The film also emphasizes the financial toll of Elizabeth’s treatment. This is transferable to a Canadian context as the Canadian public health care system does not, as a rule, cover talk therapy or psychiatric medication, thereby begging a discussion of the political economy or class dimensions of mental illness. Finally, considered as a whole, does the film romanticize mental illness at all? If not, why not? If so, is there something inherent in the medium of film that gives rise to this?

1. **Film**

[](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/7/7b/Manic_FilmPoster.jpeg)

***Manic***

**Directed by Jordan Melamed**

**Screenplay by Michael Bacall and Blayne Weaver**

**Summary**

*Manic* takes place in a juvenile psychiatric hospital in the States and centres around Lyle Jensen, a teenager who is admitted to the ward after savagely beating another teenager with a baseball bat. Out of the eight or so other teenage patients on the ward, there are at least three others who also have anger management issues, including one female patient. While Lyle had hatched a plan with his rich friend Chad to escape to Amsterdam, this plan falls to pieces when Chad, having not taken his medication for weeks, slits the throat of one of the aids. Although Lyle is attracted to Tracy, a survivor of rape, his displays of anger scare her and she keeps her distance until after the incident with Chad whereupon they spend a night together. Having swiped a set of keys, Lyle escapes the facility and, sitting at a bus stop, contemplates leaving. The film ends with him not boarding the bus but rather returning to the facility.

**Rationale**

While *Prozac Nation* focuses on a young woman, *Manic* focuses on a young man. That said, while *Manic* portrays three male patients with anger management problems, the film also portrays a female patient with the same problem. I believe this is important as many young men but also some young women in our schools struggle with anger management issues. It is the compelling case that Don Cheadle’s Dr. Monroe makes against using violence to release one’s anger that will cause many young male and perhaps female students to rethink the way they deal with their anger. On a different note, the camera techniques (unsteady, hand held shots) are much different than the more conventional ones used in *Prozac Nation*. How does this affect the delivery of the content? Does it negate a glamourized look at mental illness? On the other hand, does *Manic* romanticize mental illness at all by including the attraction between Lyle and Tracy? Does it demonize those suffering of bipolar by having Chad slit the aid’s neck? Students can consider these questions in relation to the medium of film—what is it about film that gives rise to these questionable representations of mental illness?

1. **Song**

***How to Save a Life***

**By The Fray**

**Summary**

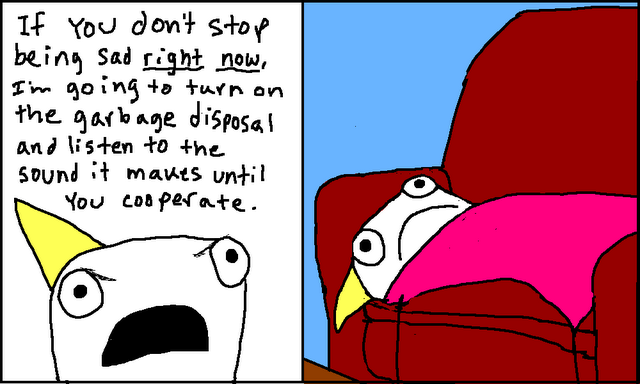
The lyrics of the song portray a singer who wanted to ‘save a life’, but as the song goes on and the singer continues to narrate the challenge of communicating with the ‘other’, I am left wondering whether the other did indeed die or commit suicide. Isaac Slade, who wrote the song, explains that the song was inspired by his experience working with a troubled teen on a week-end retreat. Slade, a privileged suburbanite, was at a loss when faced with the many troubles of the teen he was supposed to mentor. Thus the refrain, “I would have stayed up all night if I knew how to save a life.” It would appear that Slade was not singing about the death of this teen but rather his failure to reach the teen and improve his life.

[](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:HTSAL.jpg)

**Rationale**

Released in 2007, this song rose to almost instant popularity and was soon played on shows such as Grey’s Anatomy and The Hills. I would invite students to discuss why this song became so popular. Is it the fact that the song can be interpreted as someone singing about losing a friendship or a romantic relationship? Is it the fact that the song could be interpreted as someone singing about their failure to help a friend who committed suicide and this resonates with some youth’s lived experience? If it is read as such, the class can discuss how hard it can be—despite one’s best intentions— to really change a friend’s predicament if they are extremely depressed and thinking about suicide. On the other hand, “being there” for a friend in crisis can help tremendously. It is important to discuss the need to immediately seek professional help when a friend talks about suicide. Turning to an analysis of this song, what makes this song so moving? Is it the lyrics? Is it the music? Is it the combination? Is it the fact that listeners can interpret it multiple ways?

1. **On-line Comic Strip**

[](http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-9UxygvgOBBg/Tqm2pHbH-UI/AAAAAAAAGbw/P3I--D8b8sg/s1600/sad35alt3.png)

***Adventures in Depression***

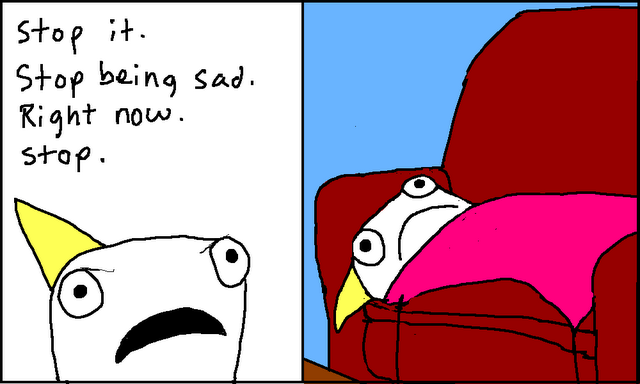
**Web-site: Hyperbole and a Half**

***http://hyperboleandahalf.blogspot.ca/2010/02/boyfriend-doesnt-have-ebola-probably.html***

**By Allie Brosh**

**Summary**

There are many cartoon strips on cartoonist Alli Brosh’s web-site but I’ve chosen her cartoon strip *Adventures and a Half* for students to analyze*.* The strip chronicles the character’s struggle with paralyzing depression in a wickedly funny manner.

[](http://3.bp.blogspot.com/-wgeoftKMFgc/Tqm2oRTxeWI/AAAAAAAAGbg/HHDVxYobk2Y/s1600/sad35alt.png)

**Rationale**

I wanted to have one text that dealt with mental illness in a funny way. The character in the cartoon is so stylized that it is unclear what gender, age or race the character is, allowing all students to see themselves in the cartoon. Students can be encouraged to discuss the value of dealing with mental illness in a humorous way. At the end, the character asserts a sort of triumph, but it is an odd sort of triumph. Students can be encouraged to consider if this triumph is of a dangerous or insufficient nature. More broadly, students can be encouraged to discuss the pros and cons of dealing with mental illness in a comic strip.